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A Shout-Out to Black Masculinity: The Vocal Performances of Robert Johnson, Little Richard, Prince and Kanye West

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Black masculinity has been narrowly circumscribed by racial stereotypes, marginalization and debilitating social codes. Popular music, nevertheless, appears to be a terrain in which these calcified sexist and racial stereotypes can be liquefied, manipulated and subverted. While the possibilities of performing alternative modes of masculinity have been amply discussed in relation to Glam Rock and Punk (see Shuker 2012: 82, 160, 185; Doolin 2009, Auslander 2006), I argue that a roster of black artists hailing from the musical tradition of gospel, R&B and Hip Hop have not only called into question cemented images of masculinity, but effectively undermined the racial stereotypes associated with them.

Rather than undertaking an encompassing study of the cultural significance of Robert Johnson, Little Richard, Prince and Kanye West, I want to circle in on their voices and styles of singing/rapping as a performance of, and a statement about, Black masculinity. Voices can potentially challenge coded norms and resist appropriation by the dominant discourse. From Johnson's Delta blues falsetto slides, via Little Richard's rock 'n' roll screams and Prince's androgynous glissandi to Kanye West's pent-up lyrical rage, these artists' vocal performances have continuously resisted and subverted normative perceptions of Black masculinity, often by ostensibly catering precisely to such stereotypical fantasies.

The ideals and expectations associated with being male, or African American and male, have often been profoundly distorted by stereotypes. Hegemonic white masculinity has continuously scripted Black men as "urban, hyper-masculine, hyper-sexual, pseudo-

criminalized" (Neil, 129), as "dangerous, anti-intellectual, reckless, incompetent, uneducated" (Jackson and Hopson, 1) or "non-normative, monstrous, dangerous" (Miller-Young, 275). The art critic and curator Thelma Golden, by declaring Black masculinity "one of the greatest inventions of the twentieth century," most aptly captures the seemingly unbridgeable chasm between the prevalent fantasy of the hyper-masculine, hyper-sexual and hyper-deviant Black man and the reality of Black masculinity in America today.

This myopic conception and neurotic representation as either "specter or spectacle" (Anthony, 7), along with a history of oppression and racism since the first African slaves were shackled and shipped to American shores, have rendered the Black male condition in America one of constant struggle, adversity and affliction. Nevertheless, whereas the social history of the United States as well as ubiquitous structures of domination such as white supremacy provide ample evidence to explain the subjugation of black men by racial oppression, Athena D. Mutua poses the question, "are they privileged by gender or oppressed by gender?" (6). Intersectional theory suggests that Black men, despite the fact that they suffer under the discrimination of racism, in comparison to Black women still enjoy certain privileges under a patriarchal order. Mutua herself posits that this theory, although cognizant of the material conditions of Black men and their status vis-à-vis Black women, does not fully account for the gendered racism with which Black men have to contend. She concludes that since African American men are not a homogenous group but rather are diverse by class, sexuality and religion, among other variations, they "are in some contexts privileged by gender and sometimes oppressed by gendered racism" (6). Thus, while Black men in certain circumstances are in a more advantageous position than Black women, Robert J. Sampson nevertheless postulates that African American men in general have been the victims of "compounded deprivation," a term denoting the mutual entanglement and reinforcement of detrimental factors such as stunted upward mobility, unemployment, and incarceration. Ta-Nehisi Coates hence concludes that "unfreedom" is "the historical norm" for African Americans ("Black Family," 82).

Popular music, though solidly anchored in the capitalist marketplace and thus largely subservient to a racially biased, heteronormative patriarchal ideology, nevertheless contains the potential to subvert the dominant discourse through the destabilizing ambiguity inherent in musical sounds and performances. The "lessons" popular songs can teach us, therefore, are all "the more effective for being invisible and intangible" (6), according to Jacqueline Warwick. Though it may be convenient to quote lyrics as a means to capture the "meaning" of a popular song, Ryan Moore assures us that "there is something far more significant being expressed in the music" (22). Thus, while Ray Charles's "I Got a Woman" may well move securely within the boundaries of a patriarchal discourse in terms of its words, his voice's

sudden, exhilarating eruption into a scratchy falsetto on the word "money" unexpectedly undercuts his initial stand, toppling the gendered performance of his booming baritone and turning the song's homage to hegemonic masculinity into something more flexible, elusive and uncontainable. The freedom inherent in such playful ambiguity, according to Greil Marcus, potentially engenders "the momentary empowerment of people who never before had reason to think anyone might be interested in what they sounded like, or what they had to say" (14).

In testing the waters of this kind of "empowerment" for African American men, I suggest that the singing voice emerges as a potent means to counteract the "gendered racism" with which Black masculinity is by and large afflicted. Elizabeth Bronfen's appeal to treat the voice as both an "aesthetic and a political category" (25) ties in with its ability to express a subject's individuality beyond interpellation, and thus to defy stereotypical representation. Freya Jarman more specifically asserts that the voice operates in a kind of disruptive "third space" while it makes its way from the body of the speaker/singer to the body of the listener as sound waves: "On leaving the body, the voice acquires the power to roam at will and launch itself into another body, forcing itself into the passive, waiting ears, and thus becomes invader, intruder… contagion" (3). The potentially sexualized site where the listening body receives the voice thus contains the potential for a renegotiation of gender identities and the power structures associated with them. "The detachment of voice from body," Jarman continues, "renders unstable the [gendered] signifiers at play here in such a way as to make the voice itself a space highly productive of the queer" (3).

The notion of the voice as an agent of the queer is based upon Judith Butler's contention that, rather than fixed, "natural" categories, male and female are performative. "[G]ender is a performance," she famously claimed, "that produces the illusion of an inner sex or essence or psychic gender core; it produces on the skin, through the gesture, the move, the gait (that array of corporeal theatrics understood as gender), the illusion of an inner depth" (28). I contend with Jarman that the voice can be understood as taking part in the "corporeal theatrics" that underpin the "illusion" of naturalized gender categories and that, accordingly, these gestures can be played with, challenged, subverted.

The voice's potential to disrupt white hegemonic patriarchy, next to its capacity to operate in a "third space" between gendered bodies and its performative potential, lies in its oscillating state between language and music. Paradoxically, the voice finds expression in language and, at the same time, reaches beyond it. Jarman states that the "voice both serves and exceeds the semiotics and syntax of the spoken word; it articulates semiotic meaning and, in its bodily nature, offers both another dimension to that meaning and another meaning altogether" (4-5). Roland Barthes is principally concerned with the space of the

encounter between language and voice, a space in which he locates the "the grain of the voice when the latter is in a dual posture, a dual production – of language and of music" (508). The voice thus negotiates the realm between the gendered spaces of the traditionally feminized body and language, customarily associated with the rational domain of masculinity. This negotiation renders the voice doubly disruptive, since it not only blurs the culturally distinct categories of so-called masculine rationality and feminine hysteria, but it dramatizes the very constructedness of such dualities as Black and white, male and female: "[T]he bodily nature of the voice and its opposition in this way renders the voice a site of danger, a borderline object that draws attention to the mutability of boundaries" (Jarman, 10). Specifically, its ability to circumvent clear (albeit illusionary) gendered demarcations – low registers for men, high for women, for instance – as exemplified by Ray Charles's falsetto seems to privilege the voice as an agent of resistance to binary oppositions.

There are distinct parallels between the vocal defiance of a restrictive notion of Black masculinity that can be heard in the music of Robert Johnson, Little Richard, Prince and Kanye West and Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s treatise on Signifyin(g) as a disruptive African American vernacular practice. By re-appropriating the signifier "signification," Gates notes, African Americans have created a potent means to undercut the conventions of formal English established by the dominant discourse. Black people have thus created their own codes and meanings through which they have been able to surreptitiously communicate below the radar of the white hegemonic order. With reference to Mikhail Bakthin, Gates identifies this phenomenon as Black "double-voicedness": an utterance that is decolonized "by inserting a new semantic orientation into a word which already has – and retains – its own orientation" (238).

This potentially unsettling rhetorical strategy has been kept alive both in language games such as toasting and the "Dirty Dozen" as well as African American popular culture. According to Gates, "the quasi-musical nature of delivery" (243), which is accentuated by the rhythm and rhymes found in language games and the traditional Signifying Monkey poems, renders Signifyin(g) part and parcel of jazz performance. Signifyin(g), moreover, is not restricted to language, but can "denote speaking with the hands and eyes." By extension, even though Gates does not specifically mention singing as a Signifyin(g) act, I propose that these artists' vocal performances, by constituting the singers' subjectivity und thus resisting gendered or racial stereotyping, embody prime examples of Signifyin(g) upon racist conceptions of Black masculinity.

Finally, these musicians share an artistic vision, born from the dissatisfaction with the racial and gender status quo, which is characterized by a certain avant-garde futurism. The British-Ghanaian critic and filmmaker Kodwo Eshun has laid down a theory of AfroFuturism

that captures this notion of futurity: the desire to leave humanism as a category colonized by what bell hooks aptly terms "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (ix) behind, and to look to the future for alternative modes of being. Discussing the music of such artists as Alice Coltrane, Sun Ra and Tricky, Eshun maintains that AfroFuturism "alienates itself from the human; it arrives from the future" (450). He rejects the notion that the "street" comprises the "compulsory logic explaining all Black music" (451) and instead advocates a dislocation from musical origins. The corollary abandonment of a "compulsory black condition" (453) can arguably be heard in the music of Johnson, Richard, Prince and West, albeit in a postmodern, ambiguous amalgam with a simultaneous appreciation of the African American musical tradition.

Robert Johnson

bell hooks, in her book *We So Cool*, has called the blues "an invitation to black men to be vulnerable, to express true feelings, to break open their hearts and expose them" (139). If we listen closely to Robert Johnson's singing in "Walkin' Blues," we can hear an incredible flexibility, elasticity, and malleability, expressed through a wide tonal range and a variety of sounds, from nasal high ("… woke up this mornin'" [0:06-0:09]) and thin tones ("…blow-ooh-in' my lonesome horn" [0:50-0:53]) to a growling and abrasive bark ("…walkin' blues" [0:14-0:16] / "Lord, I feel…" [0:36-0:40]). This not only suggests that Johnson is able to "break open" his heart and "expose" an expansive spectrum of sometimes fierce emotions, it simultaneously seems that here's a man who – despite the somber shades of the lyrics – rejoices in the freedom of expressing himself and, as a result, refuses to be a victim of his perpetual state of subalternity.

"Phonograph Blues (take 1)," recorded in 1936, serves as a telling example of Robert Johnson's masterful Signifyin(g) upon the white hegemonic order through his vocal performance. In the song's bridge, after providing a list of the locations of his sexual exploits ("Now we played it on the sofa now / we played it 'side the wall" [1:09-1:14]), he declares that, couched in the metaphor of the phonograph, his unquenchable desires have rendered him *de facto* impotent. However, the final note of this punch line, the idea that "his needles" "won't play at all" (1:15-1:18), is a perfect major third (D♯) in relation to the chord's root of B. One can hear the relish with which Johnson sang this note in the ironic, tongue-in-cheek choir boy-innocence of the phrase. By replacing the otherwise pervasive blue note (a microtonal step below the D♯) with the major third in this particular instant, Robert Johnson effectively signifies upon the European musical tradition of so-called "pure" intervals, and by extension, upon the dominant, Euro-American culture. Johnson, through this subtle,

microtonal shift, hence surreptitiously ridicules white hegemonic patriarchy by suggesting its impotence, rather than his own.

Whereas the multiple references to technological advances and machines that imply forward movement such as phonographs, cars and greyhound buses in Robert Johnson's songs hint at his AfroFuturist proclivities on a lyrical level, it appears that "If I Had Possession Over Judgment Day" does so from a musical point of view. His voice in this performance probes a mode of expression that eschews all restrictions, seemingly jettisoning his aspirations to appealing to bourgeois tastes of "black singing" and thus radically expanding the spectrum of blues and gospel singing. The A3 in the first line of the melody ("If I *had* possession …" [0:17-0:19], "I *went* to the *moun*tain as *far* as my eyes…" [0:36-0:42] in verse 2, or "I *roll and I tumble…*" [1:06-1:09] in verse 3, respectively), is a hoarse shout that seems charged with all the frustration and pent-up energy Robert Johnson had accumulated during the Jim Crow era of the 1920s and 30s. In responding to these dire circumstances by so forcefully articulating his dissent simultaneously functions as a harbinger of a time and place where African Americans overcome the historical "unfreedom" of the historical present. Indeed, his singing as well as the harsh, relentlessly driving rhythm on the guitar, can be read as prefiguring a rock 'n' roll, or even a hard rock, aesthetic. Robert Johnson, as early as 1936, thus presented his audience with a daring vision of a new Black masculinity unafraid to brazenly express joy, heartache and violent desires, and sang of the musical revolution that would rattle the cages of the American establishment twenty years later.

Little Richard

Little Richard, in his 1955 hit single "Tutti Frutti," takes up the mantle of Robert Johnson's expansion of conventional Black masculinity. His voice's plastic eccentricity and powerful rawness, in a sense thus picks up where Johnson's strained tenor left off. Whereas Johnson ridiculed the so-called "purity" of the Western musical tradition by exposing it as "impotent," Richard signifies upon hegemonic notions of condoned sexual behaviors by inserting small nodes of licentious excitement under the guise of nonsensical baby-talk ("Tutti Frutti / aw rutti") into the mainstream. At its most harmless, "Tutti Frutti" appears to celebrate Little Richard's adventures with two rather accomplished opposite-sex partners:

I got a girl named Sue
She knows just what to do (2x)
She rock to the east, she rock to the west,
But she's the girl that I love the best

…
I got a girl named Daisy
She almost drives me crazy (2x)
She knows how to love me, yes indeed
Boy, you don't know what she's doing to me

However, by naming the girls “Sue” and “Daisy” – arguably two prototypical, white American first names – Little Richard seemed to be advocating the delights of miscegenated sex in 1957, when the segregation of Jim Crow was still the status quo. At the same time, and perhaps even more disturbingly, “Sue” and “Daisy” were knowing referents to drag queens of the clubs Richard had toured, sometimes as Princess Lavonne, in the ten years leading up to the recording of “Tutti Frutti.” Therefore, rather than sanitizing the lyrics from their original open references to homosexual intercourse (“Tutti Frutti, good booty/ If it don’t fit, don’t force it/ You can grease it, make it easy…” Richard sang in performance before recording it in 1955 [qtd. in Hall]), Richard and the song’s lyricist, Dorothy LaBostrie, had filled the song with hints of illicit, subversive transgressions (see Lhamon). The line “You don’t know what she do to me,” speaks to this as well as Richard’s vocal performance, which epitomizes the unrestrained exuberance of probing the limits of the forbidden.

Richard’s powerful opening statement, “A-wop-bop-a-loo-mop alop-bom-bom,” an explosion of raw energy and licentious *joie de vivre*, buoyantly inaugurated a new era of freedom from the restraints of their parents’ generation for young African (and white) Americans. At the same time, Little Richard’s vocal phrasing, both suggestively laid-back and pressingly urgent, appeared to open up a new avenue for the representation of Black men. The sensuous groove emanating from his frenzied vocal interjections openly defied the Victorian ideal of Black manhood advocated by iconic male figures such as Fredrick Douglass, Booker T. Washington and W.E.D. Du Bois. Rather than encouraging hard work, decency, middle-class respectability and talented-tenth leadership, Little Richard filled the airwaves of Middle America with an irresistible concoction of rock ‘n’ roll exuberance and secret codes of deviant sexual mores, all contained within his signature falsetto “oooh” (in “Tutti Frutti” at 0:38, 1:09, 1:40, and 2:12, respectively). By rejecting the traditional ideals of Black masculinity and subverting the dominant discourse with his clever double-voiced utterance, Richard emerges as an ambassador for an alternative masculinity that, rather than clinging to the past, boldly embraces the future.

Prince

Prince is a "product of multiple amalgams," Nic John Ramos claims (431), addressing both the artist's mixed ancestry as well as his musical upbringing by two jazz musicians. Just as "Jazz is its own bastard child of unique Americanism, fusing a multiplicity of sounds with no discernible origin" (Ramos, 431), Prince sought to redefine the very definition of Black music in the 1980s, arguably the decade giving birth to his most exciting musical output. Blending both overdriven rock guitar solos and clean funk guitar riffs with lush analog synth-arrangements and drum machines, Prince succeeded in amalgamating a variety of musical traditions into a new sound that defied established categorizations. His singing, nevertheless, has remained deeply rooted in the Black tradition of Gospel and Rhythm and Blues.

"Do Me Baby," recorded in 1983 for his album *Controversy*, exhibits the sheer limitless spectrum and expressive force of Prince's falsetto. He initiates the song's deliciously outrageous narrative of seduction and sexual abandon by declaring, almost timidly, that "Here we are in this big old empty room" (0:15-0:20) in a breathy falsetto voice that descends from a B3 to a G♯3 and F♯3. The line "You want me just as much as I want you" (0:28-0:34) as well as the chorus of the song are arranged in a tight three-part harmony, which is reminiscent of the Black church and the Doo Wop tradition of the 1950s. Around 2:47 into the song, with no apparent effort at all, Prince leaps up to a G♯4, before delving into the second chorus. Shortly thereafter, he cracks into a sequence of ascending falsetto "ooh's," punctuated with sighs and moans, from 3:16 to 3:23, while the instruments play a stop-time figure and thus give his voice maximum exposure, until he unleashes an extended, sensuously vibrated "ooh" (another G♯4) right before the band kicks back in. At 3:55, during the song's vamped chorus, Prince completes his vocal improvisation with a pleasurably abrasive falsetto scream. This series of evocative "yeah's" suggests the singer's climactic delight in letting his voice run wild.[1] After thus establishing the falsetto as his tessitura for this song (as well as for most of the *Controversy* album), Prince surprises his audience by briefly dipping down to a B2 on the words, "Don't wanna do it all alone" at 4:12. The song peters out, finally, with more ecstatic groans and whispered words, covered in synths, a slap-bass and drums.

The pleasure he seemingly derives from vocally soaring to the highest heights of his range is predicated upon his delight to provoke his audience with a display of inexhaustible expressive freedom as well as his sly rejection of normative gender roles and sexual mores. Prince signifies upon the racial stereotype of the hypersexual Black man by being both sexually assertive and passive – after all, he is the one who wants to "be done" – and singing in a high, feminine register. His falsetto scream, then, serves as a daringly subversive

gesture that exposes the very performativity – and, by extension, the artificial social constructedness – of gender roles. Though gendered male, Prince cuts across all demarcations by choosing the female treble range, yet jettisoning traditional female behavioral standards such as demureness and constraint by uttering a gleefully guttural, high pitched scream. His ultimate undoing of any notion of gender normativity happens when he elegantly plunges into his chest voice on the aforementioned phrase, "Don't wanna do it all alone," thereby inviting his listeners to join in and rendering his delightful subversion of traditional sexual mores a communal act.

"If I Was Your Girlfriend," from his 1987 album *Sign o' the Times*, takes this masquerade a step further. Lyrically, Prince explores the implications and possibilities of slipping into the role of his ex-lover's girlfriend, which involve "doing all the things that only a best friend can," letting him "pick out your clothes," "wash your hair," "go[ing] to a movie and cry[ing] together" as well as the line, "for you naked I would dance a ballet." However, not only the words defy a hegemonic, patriarchal ideal of masculinity. The composition is credited to Prince's female alter ego, Camille, and features a sped-up and slightly distorted vocal. This effect heightens the artificiality of his performance by doubly evading the normative gaze (or hearing) of mainstream America: not only do the lyrics and songwriting credits assign him a female role which he seems to relish and find utterly gratifying, but his voice, by means of these effects, is yet further alienated from any kind of normative gender identity and thus appears to explode the very system which established the binary opposition in the first place. Prince thus vocally signifies upon traditional receptions of gender roles, such as the "strong Black man," by posing as an entity that is neither male nor female, but a futuristic, queer being who, in José Esteban Muñoz's words, rejects the "here and now" and instead insists "on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world" (1).

Kanye West

Kanye West is simultaneously one of the most successful and controversial Hip Hop artists of our time. Both in his music and his persona he constantly pushes boundaries, provokes, and confuses fans and detractors alike. Despite the fact that he has challenged the traditional images of hetero-normative Black masculinity that abound in Hip Hop since the beginning of his career, a rather substantial number of his lyrics displays a hefty dose of misogyny.[2] Even though this misogynistic stance (as well as his infamous hauteur) might be viewed as a satirical performance designed to resist his appropriation into white, middle-class respectability – West, after all, has called himself "the anti-celebrity" (Camaranica) – it nevertheless remains highly problematic at best. However, what I want to focus on here is

that his music in general, and his vocal performances in particular, have helped change the game for how Black men have been able to express themselves in the public arena. "[I]t was a fight for justice," he has told The New York Times about his artistic endeavors. "Justice. And when you say justice, it doesn't have to be war. Justice could just be clearing a path for people to dream properly."

In "I Am a God," the third track on his album *Yeezus* from 2013, West Signifies upon the restrictions placed upon African Americans in terms of their self-definition. Calling oneself a god is hubris, blasphemy and a violation of conventional codes of decency and humility. For a Black man to call himself a god (or Yeezus, for that matter), in a contemporary climate of systemic racism, completely shatters the very notion of white middle-class etiquette. Listening to West's vocal timbre, however, reveals that there is no joy or gleeful exuberance (as with Johnson, Richard or Prince) in this provocation. Instead, Kanye West sounds exhausted, bored, even passive-aggressive. This comes as no surprise, since the extent of his power as a god, ironically, is restricted to hectoring a waiter "in a French-ass restaurant" to "hurry up with my damn croissant" (1:52 to 2:00). In stark contrast to the ironic undertone of the lyrics, the scream that follows, heavily distorted and auto-tuned (at 2:12), is dead serious. This is no longer a scream of sexual liberation or a subversive unsettling of gender roles. Instead, it appears to express a deep-seated frustration, disillusionment and despair. Consequently, West reveals his self-aggrandizement to be a mere pose, a half-hearted attempt at keeping up an appearance of grandeur. It is a clever performance, nonetheless, because it reads as a Signification on, or a reversal of, blackface minstrelsy: here is a Black man who's tired of playing Sambo and instead wants to don the white mask of the most powerful character in the show. The mask, just like the phrase, "I Am a God," can give him the illusion of freedom and power, but ultimately, West's vocal performance suggests, the make-up will fade and he will have to countenance the harsh realities – the notion that "black humanity is deemed of little or no human value," in the words of George Yancy, for instance – of his existence as a member of the Black minority in the United States. At the same time, a mere reversal of the power binary – from oppressed Other to God – runs the risk of perpetuating the very system it seeks to undo. It is this realization, unsurprisingly, that reduces him to a distorted scream.

"Blood on the Leaves," another track off of *Yeezus*, extends this critique of the African American male condition by juxtaposing West's own Autotuned singing voice with snippets from Nina Simone's version of "Strange Fruit." Autotune has commonly been utilized to either "correct" vocal flaws and imperfections or to function as a vocal effect in its own right. Emily Baker notes that rather than constituting the singular body which engenders the voice, Autotune "produces the effect of yet another anonymous pop music body, constructed from

the pop music production line." This manufactured anonymity may explain the ubiquitous "disdain" with which Autotuned voices are met, which in turn stems from "that age-old requirement for musical authenticity" (Baker). Jarman, moreover, alleges that "the queer potential of the voice

is felt most intensely at those points where technologies become audible" (21). Kanye West is conscious of the post-human, disembodying, queer effect of Autotune and, arguably, makes use of this shedding of the body, of a natural, authentic core or source from which the voice emanates, in order to advance a very particular postmodern, post-human artistic vision.

The Autotuned disembodiment we can witness in "Blood on the Leaves" harkens back to the role the Black body has played in America's past, and simultaneously marshals a way out of said history. "Racism is a visceral experience," Ta-Nehisi Coates declares in *Between the World and Me*, "that … dislodges brains, blocks airways, rips muscle, extracts organs, cracks bones, breaks teeth […] the history, the economics, the graphs, the charts, the regressions all land, with great violence, upon the body" (10). The history of the United States, according to his analysis, has been predicated upon shackling, brutalizing and enslaving the Black body. This legacy, which has recently found continuation in the many cases of police brutality largely against unarmed Black people, compels African Americans to ponder the question, "how do I live free in this black body?" (Coates, *Between*, 12). Kanye West, it seems, has opted for jettisoning the Black body altogether. In the final bars of "Blood on the Leaves," his unnatural, disembodied voice proclaims in loosely connected, self-consciously edited digital fragments, "And breathe and breathe," "And live and learn," and finally, "and live" (4:45 to 6:00). In order to survive, to be able to "live" and "breathe," West paradoxically purports that the Black body must be overcome, abandoned, and transcended through technology. As a result of its historical stigmatization as subhuman by the white hegemonic discourse, the only way to retain one's humanity, the song suggests, is to leave the Black male body behind.

Whereas West's own Autotuned voice conceivably functions as a vector toward Kodwo Eshun's post-humanist AfroFuturism, its juxtaposition with Nina Simone's rendition of "Strange Fruit" evinces his yearning for, and awareness of, the Black musical tradition. Simone's sharp, metallic expulsion of the word "breeze," which blows through the entirety of West's "Blood on the Leaves," carries "The sudden smell of burning flesh" ("Strange Fruit"), a less than opaque reference to and a cutting critique of the practice of lynching. In the outro to "Blood on the Leaves," Simone's digitally severed "breeze" snippet merges with West's repetition of "breathe" to create almost a homonym (from 4:44 to 5:09). The implication here is that in order to advance from its contemporary predicament, that is, to "live" and "learn," the Black community needs to remember its history; that, in fact, the revisiting of these

collective memories is the very air – as foul and unpleasant as it may smell – they need to breathe in order to survive.[3] West's "breathe" and Simone's "breeze" thus converge into one respiratory, live-inducing act, an act which in turn "inspires" the artist to create new music out of the fragments of the African American Civil Rights Movement. "What was required," Ta-Nehisi Coates equally acknowledges, "was a new story, a new history told through the lens of our struggle" (*Between*, 44). West thus occupies a highly unstable postmodern position, a 21st-century Du Boisian double consciousness of sorts, in-between a disembodied, post-humanist futurism, and the simultaneous acknowledgment of the African American struggle of the past. In trying to revive the past as an asset for the future, to both acknowledge the violence inflicted upon the Black body as well as to use digital technology as a means to transcend it, and, finally, to tell a "new story through the lens" of the Black struggle, Kanye W1est relentlessly works to engage both Black and white America in a more nuanced, ambivalent and complex discourse about Black masculinity in the 21st century.

Conclusion

In conceiving of Black men as devils, gods, drag queens, futuristic hermaphrodites, (im)potent machines, Cyborgian Others, or – heaven forbid – girlfriends, Robert Johnson, Little Richard, Prince and Kanye West have carved out a new space for thinking about and reimagining Black masculinity. Their vocal performances, in particular, have emerged as Signifyin(g) acts that in clever and subtle ways undermine the dominant discourse on masculinity and the African American experience. This kind of clandestine, double-voiced subversion resembles Paul Laurence Dunbar's poem, "We Wear the Mask": "We wear the mask that grins and lies / It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes / … / But let the world dream otherwise / We wear the mask!" In playing up the stereotypical antics of the Black male – his unquenchable appetites, sexual prowess, and pathetic braggadocio – Johnson, Richard, Prince and West don the mask the White majority expects them to wear. However, while the lyrics – the most "visible" part of their vocal delivery – largely reinforce these clichés, their resistance, nevertheless, is rendered all the more powerful by taking place within the less tangible realms of tone, timbre and phrasing. These artists, too, thus let the "world dream otherwise" and laugh behind their masks at an unsuspecting (White) audience.

Traces of Kodwo Eshun's AfroFuturism can be found in all of these artists' music, even in Robert Johnson's blues of the 1930s, which, along with Richard's rock 'n' roll, Prince's modernist funk and West's multifaceted, Du Boisian Hip Hop, attempts to musically transcend the realm of the human and look to the future for inspiration and relief. While Robert Johnson's singing anticipates such descendants of the blues as rock 'n' roll and hard

rock, Little Richard and Prince vocally inaugurate a futuristic, queer masculinity that embraces gendered and sexual deviance. Kanye West, finally, seeks to eschew the vulnerability of the Black body through Autotune, and simultaneously reconfigures the 20th century's Civil Rights struggle for a contemporary audience. In this postmodern approach, which both acknowledges the past and attempts to rise above it, West counters Eshun's insistence on abandoning the Black musical heritage with paying homage to singers such as Nina Simone in his music. In a similar gesture, despite their aspirations towards the future, Robert Johnson's guitar picking is reminiscent of the early country blues, Little Richard's singing evinces a striking affinity to the field hollers and jump blues vocalizations of yore, and Prince's vocal ad libs and arrangements harken back to the Black church. These musicians thus subscribe to AfroFuturism while concurrently displaying a keen awareness and sincere appreciation of their African American musical legacy.

Within their musical endeavors, nevertheless, ambiguity abounds: vocal expression of Black masculinity is not a neat, theoretical exercise, but an intricate performance involving a web of intersecting aesthetic, socio-economic, and racial vectors. "The Dream" of a redemptive narrative, a salvific myth that would seem to comfortably settle, once and for all, the many open questions surrounding Black masculinity, according to Ta-Nehisi Coates, "is the enemy of all art, courageous thinking, and honest writing" (*Between,* 50). "The art I was coming to love," Coates continues, "lived in this void, in the not yet knowable, in the pain, in the question." The art of Robert Johnson, Little Richard, Prince and Kanye West, I would argue, lives in precisely this void: it questions the (accepted) discourse, acknowledges the pain, and simultaneously celebrates the beauty, infinite variety and humanity of Black men. At the same time, I read Coates' void, and thus the vocal performances of Johnson, Richard, Prince and West, as a "third space," a queer site from which patriarchal hegemony, white supremacy and systemic racism can be interrogated, critiqued and subverted.

All of these musicians thus make use of their voices in a way that challenges hegemonic notions of Blackness and masculinity, thereby effectively breaking down the barriers imposed on them by late capitalism and the codes of a racialized society. What emerges from my analysis, then, is that these artists' vocal performances must be understood as a highly original and effective means to resist und expand the narrow boundaries of Black masculinity into a dramatic affirmation of their own subjectivity. Within a contemporary popular culture dominated by Gangsta rap, Hollywood movies in which, for the most part, the best an African American actor can hope for is the role of the white hero's sidekick, and social media in which racist remarks can apparently be spread with impunity, these artists' strategies of voicing an unmitigated idea of freedom seem worth revisiting. It is my contention, therefore, that if we continue to listen closely to the complex vocal

idiosyncrasies of African American artists such as the ones investigated here, a more fluid, flexible and affirmative avenue into a constructive conversation about race, gender politics, and popular culture may open up.

Endnotes

1 On "God," the B-side of Prince's single "Purple Rain" from 1984, there's an even higher shriek - an impressive G5 - from 0:40 until 0:45.

2 From his courageous castigation of homophobia in Hip Hop music during an MTV interview in 2005, his various, non-conformist outfits including a kilt, pink polo-shirts and high-end backpacks and lyrics which highlight his vulnerability (especially on his 808s & Heartbreak album from 2008) to his support for Caitlyn Jenner's coming-out as a transgender woman in 2015, West has been praised as a remarkably progressive and socially conscious artist who tirelessly works to resist hegemonic notions of masculinity. At the same time, however, from his first hit single "Gold Digger" from 2004, which brandishes women as materialistic opportunists, his 2010 song "Monster," which, according to Anita Sarkeesian "reduces women to sexual objects and perpetuates racist stereotypes," the lines "I feel like me and Taylor [Swift]Â might still have sex/ Why? I made that b***h famous" on his latest album, The Life of Pablo (2016), to his February 2016 tweet about Bill Cosby's innocence (despite 35 women's testimonies that they were sexually assaulted by Cosby), West has continuously voiced a reactionary attitude of disrespectfulness towards women.

3 The idea of the necessity to remember as a path toward psychic wholeness recurs throughout the history of African American literature and popular culture. Ralph Ellison's narrator in Invisible Man, for instance, is reminded not only of his home in the South, but of his grandparents' status as slaves, when he eats yams in New York. Eating the yams, which triggers these memories, not only induces "an intense feeling of freedom" (24), but ultimately leads to the narrator's recognition of his identity, as he famously proclaims, "I yam what I am" (33). This notion of the yams as a powerful stimulant for remembering also appears in Kendrick Lamar's hit single "King Kunta" (2015), a song principally concerned with paying homage to the rapper's musical heroes from James Brown to Mausberg. One of the key themes in Toni Morrison's novel Beloved is the notion of "rememory" - the indispensability of actively remembering the past (through telling stories, for instance) as a means to progress into the future - and Ta-Nehisi Coates, in Between the World and Me, similarly admonishes his readers to defy the dominant culture's tendency to conveniently "forget" the history of Black America: "The forgetting is habit, is yet an other necessary component of the Dream. They have forgotten the scale of theft that enriched them in slavery; the terror that allowed them, for a century, to pilfer the vote; the segregationist policy that gave them their suburbs. They have forgotten, because to remember would tumble them out of the beautiful Dream and force them to live down here with us, down here in the world... To awaken them is to reveal that they are an empire of humans and, like all empires of humans, are built on the destruction of the body. It is to stain their nobility, to make them vulnerable, fallible, breakable humans" (145). Needless to say, Coates here refers to the illusionist white liberal "Dream" of a post-racial society, which stands in stark contrast to Martin Luther's vision of racial harmony in his "I Have a Dream" speech. Kanye West makes a similar distinction when he proposes "justice" as "a path for people to dream properly": to strive toward a "just" racial equality, rather than to live in ignorance or resignation.

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